

# Archeologists study ancient whale trap

The Associated Press

Yellowknife, Northwest Territories—Large herds of beluga whales migrate every sum-

mer to the mouth of the Mackenzie River, at the northwest extremity of Canada, to feed on an abundance of small

fish.

It is a dangerous dining spot.

The shallow, heavily-silted estuary is a natural whale

trap and native people of the Mackenzie Delta have traditionally used it to advantage.

Back in 1848, the explorer Sir John Richardson recorded watching 200 Eskimos set out in a line of kayaks from Kittigazuit village, at the river mouth, after a herd went by upriver.

Shouting and banging their paddles, the hunters drove the alarmed whales into narrow channels and on to shoals where they became easy prey to harpoons.

Several such hunts over a season were enough to sustain a large Eskimo population in the delta — estimated at more than 2,000 people a century ago.

Almost nothing else is known about these people.

Measles and influenza which European whalers brought wiped them out and knowledge of their history and social structure died with them.

All that remains are the sites of ancient Eskimo villages, which are quickly eroding into the Mackenzie River.

"Within 10 years almost nothing will be left," says Chuck Arnold, chief archaeologist at Yellowknife's museum, the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Center.

"The accumulation of silt at the river mouth is pressing the earth down, so the sites are sinking," he says.

"Also, ice scouring and the wave action of the ocean are having a serious effect."

Arnold is leading an archaeological expedition to the delta

this summer before all is lost.

He has chosen Richard's Island as a starting point, the most southerly and likely the oldest of eight known village sites.

The most northerly site, Kittigazuit, was excavated in 1969 by Robert McGee, an archaeologist from the National Museum of Man, so Arnold knows something of what to expect.

"We know they lived in semi-permanent houses made of driftwood and covered with sod, with up to three families to a house."

The study promises to be an uncomfortable one.

The delta is notorious for its mosquitos and Richard's Island is a denning ground for grizzly bears.

"We have our bug spray and firearms. The main thing is to keep the kitchen clean and burn the garbage every day," says Richard Stromberg, Ph.D. student at the University of Toronto and field director of the project.

Five years ago two young archaeologists — Ellen Bielawski of Yellowknife and Sally Cole of Toronto — began hiring high school students from communities in Northwest Territories to help in their archaeological study of Somerset Island in the High Arctic.

They founded the Northern Heritage Society, based in Yellowknife, and continue to run the field school on Somerset, digging by day and giving classes by night.